

News

Statement: Update on the Solicitors Regulation Authority investigation on the Post Office Horizon IT scandal

19 January 2024

Between 2000 – 2015, sub-postmasters and mistresses (SPMs) were wrongly prosecuted for offences based on information from a faulty electronic accounting system, 'Horizon', which made it look like money was missing. From wrongful convictions through to financial ruin and devastating personal consequences, the miscarriages of justice in this case have severely impacted the lives of hundreds of SPMs.

In light of the recent significant interest in the Post Office Horizon Scandal and the resumption of hearings at the ongoing statutory public inquiry [<https://www.postofficehorizoninquiry.org.uk/>] , we are providing an update on our investigation, building on our October 2022 statement [<https://www.sra.org.uk/sra/news/statement-post-office-horizon-scandal/>] .

Our investigation

We are here to protect the public. Our rules set out that solicitors must work to high professional and ethical standards. This includes upholding the rule of law, acting with integrity, and in a way that upholds public trust and confidence in the profession.

As officers of the court, solicitors should never put other interests - such as the outcome for their client - above the law and the proper administration of justice.

We are investigating, with live cases into a number of solicitors and law firms who were working on behalf of the Post Office/Royal Mail Group.

Gathering evidence

In order to protect the public and maintain trust and confidence in the profession, we aim to make sure we have access to – and have a comprehensive understanding of - all the available, relevant evidence.

We have been gathering evidence through various means. This includes calling in evidence under our own powers, obtaining a court order requiring the Post Office/Royal Mail Group to provide us with relevant documents, and reviewing the information shared publicly through the statutory inquiry.

So far, our investigation has involved scrutinising tens-of-thousands of pages of information and evidence.

Taking action

We will take action where we find evidence that solicitors have fallen short of the standards the public expects.

Our investigation covers multiple, multifaceted issues where there may have been potential misconduct. New issues and evidence are coming to light on an ongoing basis, particularly from the public inquiry. We expect further relevant evidence from the inquiry in the coming months, when it will look at issues such as the conduct of the group litigation and governance.

We expect to be in the best position to take any meaningful action to get the right outcome after the full facts and all the relevant issues have been aired through the inquiry.

But we are keeping our position under constant review. We will continue to engage with the inquiry to make sure we are aware of any issues that may require more immediate action. At the moment, we do not have evidence to show that any solicitor presents an ongoing risk to the public that needs to be addressed through urgent action.

We have a range of powers to take action against solicitors and firms to protect the public and act as a deterrent. This includes being able to fine solicitors and traditional law firms up to £25,000 and put controls on how they practise. In cases of serious misconduct where our view is that a more significant sanction is needed, we will take cases to the independent Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. They have the power to issue unlimited fines and stop solicitors from practising – either for a limited period (a suspension) or indefinitely (striking off).

Paul Philip, SRA Chief Executive, said: 'The impact of this miscarriage of justice on so many individuals is tragic. We have live investigations into the actions of lawyers in these cases.

'Although the range of issues we are investigating is complex, the fundamentals are simple. The public expect solicitors to behave ethically. They must act independently and do the right thing in the interests of justice.

'We will take action where we find they have failed to do so. This is vital to protect the public, maintain trust in the profession, and send a clear message that any solicitor behaving unethically should expect serious consequences.

'We will act as swiftly as we can, but it is important that we get this right. We owe that to everyone impacted in this case and the wider public.'